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Patrols in Germany: Postwar Vestige

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BONN, March 28 — The fatal shooting of an American officer in East Germany last Sunday violently marred one of the most smoothly functioning relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union: administering their vestigial occupation rights in Germany.

News The carefully tempered anger of the United States over the killing of Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr. by a Soviet sentry appeared to suggest a wish to contain the incident and not allow it to disrupt the arms talks.

Analysis Similarly, Western diplomats noted that — in contrast to the adamant position taken on the downing of a South Korean airliner in 1983 — the Soviet Union had expressed "regret" over the slaying even while accusing the officer of having taken pictures inside a restricted military area.

Responses Were Restrained

The calibrated responses of both sides were typical of their daily dealings in observing agreements arising from their roles as onetime allies who defeated and occupied Nazi Germany.

While little known, these arrangements are vital to the hold of the United States, Britain and France on West Berlin, isolated within East German territory. They are also significant for the Soviet Union in justifying its military presence in East Germany.

The unit to which Major Nicholson belonged, known as a military liaison mission, dates from the occupation era and has survived the emergence of East Germany and West Germany as independent countries.

The missions were first established

in 1947 to permit Soviet, American, British and French authorities to observe and coordinate activities in their respective occupation sectors.

The dismantling of the occupation administrations in the two Germanys did not affect the liaison missions, which are accredited not to the German governments, but to the former occupying forces.

Being allowed to observe military activities on both sides of the East-West German border was deemed too valuable both to the Soviet Union and to the Western nations to abandon, and the missions have continued to function.

Aggressive Reconnaissance

The missions of all four former occupying nations are known for aggressive reconnaissance habits. Their cars travel heavily laden with advanced cameras and electronic listening devices; it is normal for officers to wear field uniforms, to get out of their vehicles and take photographs, as Major Nicholson did on Sunday.

In East Germany, the Western liaison officers are routinely followed, making it difficult for them to sneak unobserved into a restricted area. In West Germany, Western forces have orders to report Soviet liaison vehicles when they are spotted.

Car rammings, temporary detentions and beatings have punctuated the history of the liaison teams in East Germany. A year ago, a French observer was killed when rammed by an East German military truck. A Pentagon spokesman this week mentioned two incidents in 1983 when shots had been fired at American teams.

Yet, despite this adversary relationship, Westerners accredited to the Soviet forces in Potsdam say they have unusually convivial ties to Soviet officers.

The centerpiece of Soviet-American coexistence is Berlin, divided at war's

end into Soviet, American, British and French sectors. Having failed to choke off West Berlin in 1948 by a land blockade, which was circumvented by an American airlift, the Russians reconciled themselves to living with a Western island within the Soviet bloc.

Since then West Berlin has been treated as a separate international entity by the Soviet Union, and as part of West Germany by the Western nations.

Agreed to Disagree Over Berlin

By the four-power accord of 1971, the Western allies and the Soviet Union agreed to disagree over Berlin, with the Russians contending that East Berlin, as the capital of East Germany, no longer fell under postwar arrangements and the Western allies saying that it did, just like West Berlin.

"We say it is a circle," said one American familiar with the diplomatic obscurities. "They say it is a circle. But we have agreed not to change it."

Practice has largely vindicated the West's position. Western patrols move daily unmolested through East Berlin, as Soviet ones do through West Berlin.

A few institutions still preserve a postwar spirit of cooperation. The four-power Berlin Air Safety Center, situated in West Berlin, controls air access to the city on the basis of a 1946 pact.

Another quirky institution under four-power control is the Spandau prison in West Berlin, where Nazi war criminals were jailed. Its sole occupant is Rudolf Hess, the 90-year-old former deputy leader of the Nazi party.